

Fashion Knowledge

Theories, Methods, Practices and Politics

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Introduction

The Politics of Fashion Knowledge between Practice and Theory

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This volume frames a paradigm shift in the research of fashion towards the site of fashion research as a permeable, collaborative field of critical practice and research ‘in, for and through’ fashion (Frayling 1993; Findeli 2004: 42). Moving on from a philosophy (Foucault 1972) and sociology of science perspective (Bourdieu [1984] 1990), henceforth we consider the concept of fashion knowledge as the common ground for the formation of a critical contemporary fashion research practice. Assembled under this umbrella, the projects and writings in this volume are both theoretically dense and experimental, and creative and research-based. Focusing on their thematic interdependence, we aim as editors at rebalancing the relationality of research practices in fashion and establishing critical fashion research as an expanded field of knowledge beyond the obsolete gaps of theory and practice.

The book outlines the rise of practice-based research in fashion and exposes the multifaceted debates and complex overlaps that exist within it. Creating a scope where intellectual activism and critical art and design projects team up to decolonize, politicize and democratize fashion research, we also aim at moving fashion studies forward. As a paradigmatic endeavour, however, this work is embedded in the multiple reconfigurations of fashion knowledges since the 1980s.

From the late 1980s throughout the 1990s, conceptual and experimental fashion designers and artists have turned fashion itself into a site of ‘situated knowledges’ (Haraway 1988) from where to examine and to question both the fashion and the social system. Martin Margiela, Bless, Helmut Lang, Lutz Huelle, Hussein Chalayan and Bernadette Corporation, fashion photographers such as Wolfgang Tillmans, Juergen Teller, Corinne Day, Mark Borthwick and fashion magazines such as *Purple*, *i-D*, *Dazed & Confused*, *The Face* and *Visionaire*

proposed a new, anti-glamour, deconstructed and *anti-fashion* fashion design. Critical fashion knowledge has been produced in and through the practices of fashion and art. This recalibration of fashion and its parameters of beauty and the body, of the everyday and the mundane that happened in fashion in the 1990s, represents the aesthetic and conceptual reservoir to which later generations of fashion designers and fashion academics alike have been referring in their critical expansion of fashion design and fashion knowledge.

Concurrently, fashion studies emerged as a platform that, since the mid 1980s in the wake of post-structuralism and cultural studies, renewed and fostered contemporary research on fashion and clothing. Under this aegis, fashion knowledge in different disciplines – from social sciences, art history, literary studies, to gender and cultural studies – was bundled. After fashion studies had been consolidated as an academic discipline with dynamic research activities by the mid 1990s, Anglo-American (art) universities began to establish fashion studies programmes in the 2000s. At the same time, practice-based doctoral and postdoctoral research arose from the tradition of cultural studies and the study of fashion at art and design colleges in the United Kingdom.

Consequently, fashion knowledge has been renegotiated, especially from the angle of reconfiguring the interrelations of theory and practice. This development of a theoretically reflexive form of fashion practice has been fuelled by the integration of academic research and theory into the design and development process. The institutionalization of postgraduate degrees in fashion education has significantly stimulated the consideration of research methodologies and strategies as constitutive to the final ‘product’ (Valle Noronha and Chun 2018: 3). Fashion design is one of the last disciplines to be touched by the rise of practice-based research, a structural paradigmatic turn that was initiated in the fields of design, fine art and architecture since the early 1980s.

As editors of this volume, we are involved in the present project of interrelating and negotiating these different strands of fashion knowledge towards the foundation of critical fashion research practice. In doing so, we explicitly speak of fashion research as a term and perspective that does *not* consider the differences of design, art and science in their modes of knowledge production, but brings their thematic and methodological interdependencies into view. We thereby refer to the contemporary debates in artistic research (Frayling 1993; Holert 2011; Bippus 2012; Baldauf and Hoffner 2016) and design research (Mareis 2011; Sangiorgi and Scott 2015; Vaughan 2017; Rosner 2018). We also relate to present developments aiming at democratizing, decolonizing, founding and reimagining fashion studies (Kawamura 2004; Entwistle 2009; Jenss 2016; von Busch 2016; Fashion and Race Database 2017; *Fashion Studies* 2017; Hoette and Stevenson 2018; Gaugele and Titton 2019a, 2019b).

Methodologically, contemporary fashion research practices are situated in a triangle of the discursive strands of artistic research, practice-based research in design and the innovation of methods and dissemination practices in the social sciences. First, in particular, sociology (Lury 2018) and anthropology (Clarke 2017; Pink et al. 2017) expanded their bodies of knowledge through the foundation of ‘inventive methods’ that critically engage and interconnect theory and practice, as well as include participatory and aesthetic research methods and performative representational ways of exploration to extend the repertoire of ‘materially innovative methods’ (Lury and Wakeford 2012: 1). Second, in terms of a critical design research practice, the ‘objects become the provocative materialization of a critical reflection conducted by the designer and are considered as the medium to elicit a similar critical reflection and possibly behaviour in users and observers’ (Sangiorgi and Scott 2015: 127). Contemporary critical, practice-based design knowledge differentiates into the following categories and methodologies: ‘design for social practices’, where critical reflection provides the basis for any kind of practice-oriented design intervention; ‘transformation design’, where designers, facilitators and project participants cooperate on the ground of a critical approach to challenge existing power relations by imagining, starting and maintaining processes of change; ‘design for social innovation’, which opens up innovation processes and critical perspectives towards modes of production and consumption as well as towards existing power structures (Sangiorgi and Scott 2015: 127). And, as outlined by Carol Tulloch from a design research perspective in this volume (113–35), the origins of design activism and its making of a politics for democracy, ecology and care are credited to Victor Papanek.

Third, contemporary practices of practice-based fashion research are mostly oriented towards extending the boundaries between fine arts and applied arts, as ‘expanded fashion practices’ and practice-based artistic fashion research. In her essay, Lara Torres (53–69) elaborates this fashion knowledge ‘based on the experience of the practice of an artist’ in relation to art, craft and film practices. For Ruby Hoette (81–90, in this volume), the extension towards an ‘expanded fashion practice’ means a ‘practice that begins to spread or enter into the areas between or at the intersection of disciplines’. Her position within an ‘expanded fashion practice’ aims at ‘the plurality of connections and overlaps between thinking/doing/making/being fashion’ and at producing and valuing ‘knowledges of fashion through practice’ (81–82).

Since this book has been created as part of a research project, most of the contributors have met within the framework of a performative arrangement specially curated for this purpose. As this discursive format itself has been part of the development of practice-based fashion knowledge, it will be discussed in more detail within our introduction.

TALKSHOW: The site of the practice-based fashion discourse

On 22 October 2019, the Austrian Center for Fashion Research hosted the one-day symposium *TALKSHOW: The Politics of Practice-Based Fashion Research* at Vienna's Museum of Applied Arts, curated by Wally Salner. The symposium brought together a group of fashion scholars, designers, educators and practitioners to explore critical contemporary fashion (research) practices and to investigate critical fashion knowledge between theory and practice, beyond assumed disciplinary and epistemological boundaries. Many of the contributions in this volume were initially presented at that symposium in Vienna, while others are testimonies of international debates that were part of the research activities of the Austrian Center for Fashion Research, a research project funded by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Science Research and Economy, led by Elke Gaugele. A series of diverse research activities preceded *TALKSHOW*: round tables, expert meetings, postgraduate summer schools and several joint publication projects (Gaugele and Titton 2019a, 2019b). The symposium was meant to offer an arena for practice-based fashion research and to showcase critical curatorial, artistic and academic interventions in fashion, art and design alike. The chosen location was the so-called Innovation Lab, an open room in the basement of the Museum of Applied Arts, halfway between an amphitheatre and a lecture room. The Innovation Lab was transformed into the setting of a small fashion (research) universe, with an impromptu photography studio, an arrangement of clothes racks for the display of fashion installations, a stage for lectures and performances, a circular arrangement of chairs for panel discussions and, of course – the hallmark of every academic gathering, a beamer for the projection of presentations. Artistic director Wally Salner, a fashion designer, educator, artist and member of the Austrian Center for Fashion Research, conceived the symposium as a space within which several practices of fashion and fashion research could be enacted, as a 'court' that enabled people to converse, like in a talk show. It is important to describe the setting of the event here in this introduction, because the spatial concept for the symposium mirrored the multidisciplinary and multilayered reality of practice-based fashion research, an endeavour that progresses from dialogic encounters between fashion designers and researchers, educators and students, curators and visitors. The volume *Fashion Knowledge: Theories, Methods, Practices and Politics* follows suit and sets aside the traditional hierarchies between written and visual content by assembling academic essays equally next to visual essays and artistic interventions and by proposing a different editorial concept for practice-based research that eschews the traditional logic of academic publishing. Three of the four visual essays in this volume are based on performances that took place at the symposium: Priska Morger's lecture performance *Skin Host and Heavenly*

Visitor, NCCFN's lecture performance *Constructive Deconstructivism – Individual Collectivism* and Maria Zieglböck's review *DISCOURSE, Cruise 2020*, a fashion editorial which she produced on site with the participants of the symposium as fashion models. The performative element was a defining and programmatic feature of the symposium; and in writing the introduction to this volume and thinking more systematically about the theories, methods, practices and politics of fashion knowledge, it is worth revisiting these lecture performances as they pointed to several important areas of fashion knowledge presented in this volume.

In her lecture performance *Skin Host and Heavenly Visitor*, Priska Morger carried out several actions that blended her professional role as fashion educator (she is professor at the Institute of Fashion Design in Basel, Switzerland), her embodied selfhood and her expertise as a certified practitioner of Eutony, a form of body-centred psychotherapy. An eye-shaped mirror, a pile of gloves, an overhead projector, a beamer, a theremin (an electronic music instrument controlled without physical contact) and the elements of her own outfit (a hairnet, an apron, high-heeled boots, gloves) were used as props for a multisensory exploration into Priska Morger's work/world. The first part of the performance consisted of a succession of Morger's movements: from showing a portrait of herself with an enigmatic subtitle behind the overhead projector, to facing the audience, to slowly removing layers of her outfit, to playing the theremin. In the second part, the audience was invited to participate in the performance: Morger guided the small crowd through their tactile experience of wearing a glove they had been asked to choose beforehand. After that, a short Eutony exercise was carried out following Morger's instructions, involving the removal of shoes and 'grounding' through the alternating release of muscular tensions. Morger's lecture performance blended the doing and thinking by combining body and mind through a therapeutic approach that she conceives to be at the basis for the development of a consciousness in fashion design that is at once embodied and metaphysical. She combines elements of feminist performance art (Martha Rosler, Marina Abramovic, Carolee Schneemann, Ana Mendieta) with an interest in embodiment, the female gaze, fetishized objects and intersubjectivity, which have always been at the forefront of feminist discourse (for an overview, see Conboy et al. 1997) and feminist fashion scholarship (Entwistle 2000; Entwistle and Wilson 2001; Steele 1996, 2001). During the symposium's closing discussion, Morger's distinctive approach to fashion at the intersections of (re)searching, educating and healing led to a conversation about the role of fashion in the Anthropocene, and about the possibility for fashion to move beyond its status as an aesthetic and commercial experience, which would enable fashion to become a 'restorative' space that heals through sustainable practices grounded in embodied knowledge. Such an understanding of fashion as an embodied political

practice can be read as a response to feminist, antiracist, transgender and ecological movements that re-examine the body as a site of confrontation with the state and capitalism, but also as the carrier of transformative social practices. In the face of capitalist disciplinary regimes that transformed the female body into a work machine, Federici advocates for reclaiming the body in radical feminist theorizing and anti-capitalist activism:

In this context, reclaiming our body, reclaiming our capacity to decide about our corporeal reality, begins by affirming the power and wisdom of the body as we know it, in that it has formed over a long period of time, in constant interaction with the formation of the earth, in ways that are tampered with at great risk for our well-being.

(2020: 5)

In her essay ‘The transformative power of practice-based fashion research’, José Teunissen, based on the keynote lecture she delivered at the symposium in Vienna, writes in the opening essay of this volume about the emergence of a new type of fashion designer who repositions fashion as a space for critical activism and social change. The lecture performance of Nina Jaun, founding member of the Swiss fashion design collective NCCFN, inserted itself into this new category of critical fashion practice. The lecture performance began with a short film consisting of a rapid succession of sequences showing different people and practices involved in NCCFN, culminating in the final scene that showed women with masks and hairnets packaging reappropriated NCCFN polo shirts. After the end of the film, seated at the table in the centre of the room, Jaun recited a presentation about NCCFN’s fashion design mission to work with the existing, that is, to reappropriate the mass-produced products, to deconstruct them and to make something new out of them. Meanwhile, a fellow NCCFN member operated a screen printer on the other end of the table, meticulously aligning a red polo shirt under the screen, applying black ink, covering the NCCFN logo on the screen and, finally, printing the logo on the fabric. The process of screen printing illustrated the concept explained by Jaun: by building on existing garments, NCCFN shifts the focus of their activity on a redefinition of production and consumption. The design tactic of reappropriation has enjoyed enormous popularity in contemporary fashion: for his first fashion design label, Pyrex Vision (founded in 2012), Virgil Abloh (creative director of Off-White and artistic director of Louis Vuitton’s menswear collections) bought deadstock Ralph Lauren flannel shirts for USD 40 each, screen-printed them with the word ‘Pyrex’ and the number 23, in homage to his childhood hero, Michael Jordan. The flannel shirts were then sold for USD 550. Since Abloh was appointed artistic director for the Louis Vuitton menswear collections in 2018, his distinctive approach

to fashion design has caused much controversy, as the power dynamics behind the appropriative gesture changed drastically and many independent fashion designers made acquaintance with Abloh's appropriative 'homages' and saw their designs reappear under another brand's name. The ascent of Virgil Abloh into the highest ranks of the fashion industry testifies to fashion's need for constant reinvention and rejuvenation, and it shows that the design strategy of reappropriation can itself become reappropriated and reframed in totally different constellations of intellectual ownership and economic power – which in the best case can occur to the advantage of both parties, but to the detriment of the initial critical activism.

In summary, we note with Foucault that fashion is not just 'a form of knowledge (*connaissance*) or type of rationality which, crossing the boundaries of the most varied sciences, manifests the sovereign unity of a subject, a spirit, or a period' (1972: 191). Referring to his archaeology of knowledge, we examine fashion as an episteme with a 'totality of relations that can be discovered, for a given period' (Foucault 1972: 191).

*Fashion knowledge, practice-based fashion
research and sites of fashion and politics*

The present volume is structured into three sections: Fashion Knowledge; Reflections on Fashion as Practice; and Sites of Fashion and Politics.

The first section, Fashion Knowledge, comprises five contributions that revolve around new forms of fashion knowledge that are forming with and alongside shifting fashion practices. Fashion theorist and curator José Teunissen looks at a new generation of 'hybrid' fashion designers who integrate design, artistic strategies and research so as to establish fashion as a cultural force on its own, beyond the realm of the commercial. Her essay gives insight into two exhibitions about this new form of fashion design activism that Teunissen has curated in 2014 and 2018 and argues that practice-based fashion designers 'train their sights on the tangible, concrete dimension of fashion, emphasizing its artisanal power and embracing its timeless, sustainable aspects' (24).

Thereafter, Monica Titton examines the institutionalization of practice-based fashion research and the formalization of design research degrees by framing this joint development within the context of the neo-liberalization of higher education. Through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's writings on the academic field, she discusses the establishment of practice-based research as the expression of a power struggle over influence and relevance, a struggle that is further intensified by neo-liberal policies in the field of higher education.

In her case study of artistic research and its institutionalization in the German-speaking countries, Elke Bippus introduces the artistic work of knowbotiq (an art duo formed by Yvonne Wilhelm and Christian Hübler) and in particular their project *kotomisi: un-inform*. Fragmentation, recombining and ornamentation are discussed by Bippus as work modes in knowbotiq's artistic research endeavour to update historiographies and imaginations inscribed in the clothing ensemble *kotomisi*, worn by former enslaved women on the Dutch colony of Surinam in the seventeenth century. Bippus argues that institutions must create conditions 'in which the artistic practices, which encompass diverse sensual and linguistic forms of expression, can refine and specify in their epistemological dimension and receive the opportunity to develop and discuss a heterogeneous, transversal, undisciplined field of research' (48).

Lara Torres retraces and redefines disciplinary boundaries between fine arts and applied arts, between practice and research and between fashion and art by proposing a methodology that bridges the gap between practice and theory. Torres develops a method that merges written documentation and film as a tool for fashion artistic research; and with reference to Aristotle's notion of poetics, she proposes a fashion ontology that opens itself to products, processes and experiences and considers them as equal to texts.

The last of the contributions in the first section is the editorial '*DISCOURSE, Cruise 2020*' by renowned fashion photographer and educator Maria Zieglböck, which was also one of the performative formats presented as part of the symposium *TALKSHOW: The Politics of Practice-Based Fashion Research*. The editorial concludes the section on fashion knowledge, because it can be located on both sides of the practice-based fashion research spectrum: with her image campaign, Zieglböck recreated a format that is formally and stylistically typical for fashion media. On the other hand, as a photographer, she draws on a medium that adds a layer of observation and reflection to the reality at hand. By casting audience members, speakers and various helpers involved in the symposium as models for the editorial, Zieglböck employed fashion photography in analogy to an ethnographic study and exposed the politics of appearance of the people involved in the production of knowledge. '*DISCOURSE, Cruise 2020*' inserts the symposium with its protagonists and guests into the visual taxonomy of fashion media, a powerful reminder that academic discourses are also subjected to trends and fashions.

The second section brings together four contributions that reflect on fashion as practice and pertain to the domain of practice-based fashion research. Ruby Hoette writes about her practice-led project *Conversation Piece*, in which tools and techniques related to the realm of textiles and the realm of written words are applied to reveal perspectives on expanding fashion practices. Hoette argues that the relevance of practice-based fashion research lies in occupying a hybrid or

expanded space, so as to uncover the ‘embodied, temporal and intellectual potential of fashion’ (89). How to work with existing materials, to be realistic, to rethink consumerism and, after all, materialize visions, visualize concerns and propose solutions is the main concern of NCCFN. In their contribution, the fashion collective answers these questions with a manifesto that redefines the contemporary raw resources in fashion and with a picture spread reflecting what the de-/reconstruction and appropriation of the existing in a world of individuality, authorship and creative ownership could mean. Wally Salner’s essay recuperates the methods and concepts of both fashion design and artistic production in order to formulate a methodology for the expanded fashion field. She locates her own research and practice in fashion design at the interface between fashion, art and research. It is in this interface, Salner argues, that

not only do backgrounds and the conditions of contemporary, artistic production come into analytical and creative focus, but also their symbolic meaning, their representation, as well as the transformation, permeability and limitation of their signs/terms within the system of fashion and art.

(99)

Priska Morger’s work, discussed extensively above, can also be placed in the liminal space theorized by Salner.

The third section sheds light on different sites and entanglements of fashion and politics in distinctive contemporary and historical moments of de-/colonization, anti-/racism and anti-/globalization. Based on critical fashion research practices, three essays from the field of fashion studies and one artistic contribution bring in intellectual activism as well as critical design and design activism.

Right from the start, Carol Tulloch stresses the potential of design activism and its urgency for decolonial and anti-racist activism and the making of a politics in which Black Lives Matter. Tracing the history of style activist politics from the decolonial UK Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) in the late 1970s, to the series of T-shirts in mourning and justice for George Floyd, killed by the police on 25 May 2020 in Minneapolis, she describes the printed letters ‘PLEASE I CAN’T BREATHE’ ‘as an embodied global outcry of the murder of the African American’ (129). Tulloch’s reflections on the history of design as a political tool and her theory on style activism itself bring fashion into political action.

The symbolic death of the ‘White man’ is part of Jojo Gronostay’s contribution. At a funeral ceremony, performed by Ghana’s dancing pallbearers, the picture spread features the burying of clothes from his fashion label DEAD WHITE MEN’S CLOTHES (DWMC). DWMC translates the Ghanaian term *obroni wawu* into the practices of a contemporary fashion brand. Working with items from the

African second-hand clothing market, Gronostay questions and deconstructs the system of the *obroni wawu* as a matter of the global fashion system, its neo-colonialist economic agenda and identity politics from a postcolonial perspective.

That neo-liberal hegemonic power, which at present reinforces cultural and political differences and transforms them into nationalist distinctions and inequalities between an imaginary ‘us and them’ with xenophobic codes for inclusion, exclusion and even segregation, is debated by Andreas Spiegel. Considering different layers of fashion politics in the spheres of culture, society, economy and international politics, he argues that the concept of fashion is mainly based on the representation of difference and distinction as well as on political struggles grounded on social inequalities.

Finally, referring to a Foucauldian archaeology of knowledge, Elke Gaugele’s historical in-depth analysis revises the production of early-modern fashion knowledge in the late Enlightenment era. Through gradual exemplary inspections of the image of the *General Vestimental Map of the World’s Inhabiters* ([1787] 1796) and its related theories on vestimental kinship, she carves out the deeper colonial axes and axioms of the historical depth structures of the politics of imperial western fashion knowledge, which are still partly active today. Furthermore, she reveals an interesting ‘wish image’ of the epoch that might be of particular relevance today.

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